

## AN ARTIST — BY INHERITANCE

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Some time late in the 18th Century in the village of Bara Mossoa, in the East Bengal district of Mymensingh, there lived a Majumdar of exuberant temperament. Every morning Ramakrishna Ray consumed a basket of fried rice and large jackfruit.

In his youth he had been so handsome that a wealthier man than his father chose him as his son-in-law. Though Ray loved his long ancestry of officials which he could trace back to the middle of the 1500s, he also loved Vishnu and music, and enthusiastically sang devotional songs accompanying himself on his 'Dhole' which he sometimes beat so hard that it splintered to pieces.

This was the strong-willed, commanding, great-great-great grandfather of Satyajit Ray, who composed his own music for his first colour film, *Kanchenjunga*. Ramakanta had two sons. The elder, who married but had no son, had a curious habit of replying to all questions in verse. Such versifying became a distinct talent in his great-great nephew and

nieces and, skipping a generation, it has reappeared again as an inclination in Sandip, Satyajit Ray's eight-year-old son.

But Ramakanta's younger son, Loknath, emerged as exceptional. A scholar of Sanskrit and Persian, he recoiled quite early from measuring land and settling disputes between contending zamindars, as his father called upon him to do. His mystic mind was captured by the beauty of *Tantric* texts and, as he became absorbed in yoga, his father feared he would depart, to become a *sadhu*. Since there was no direct male heir to this branch of the Rays - only cousins who were becoming very rich as *zamindars*—Loknath bowed to the will of Ramakanta and took a wife who bore him one son, Shyamsundar.

### Mystic Studies

Yet as soon as the child was born Loknath retreated to his mystic studies, and now his father, fearing he would desert the world, ordered that Loknath's *Tantric* books should be thrown into the river. This violent act so affected Loknath that, though he was but 32, he went to his hut near the cremation ground, lay down and, eating no more, willed his own death. Comforting his father, Loknath predicted that his son, Shyamsundar, would be like a tree putting forth many branches, and the progeny would flourish.

Shyamsundar fathered five sons and three daughters, and his sons alone gave him nineteen grandsons and thirteen grand-daughters. His youngest daughter had fourteen children. She is still alive at 90. One of them being the film director, Nitin Bose. Shyamsundar, having become a distinguished Munshi, noted for his interpretations of Sanskrit and Persian texts, was the first Ray to add English to his linguistic knowledge.

His son, known as Upendrakishore Ray, grew up to combine art and science. Adopted



early by the then childless relative, the *zamindar* Harkishore Ray Chowdhury, Upendrakishore settled in Calcutta after his father's and his adoptive father's death. Secretly interested in the Brahmo Samaj for a long time, Upendrakishore now joined the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj of which one of the founders was the dynamic Dwarakanath Ganguli, the social reformer who had discarded his triple thread and ardently campaigned for the education of women. Ganguli's second wife, Kadambini, having emerged as the first of two college graduates in Bengal, had gained the distinction of being India's first qualified woman doctor.

Ganguli had a grown daughter, Bidhumukhi, by his first wife, and this young lady met at the Samaj the handsome and temperamentally calm and collected young artist-musician *zamindar*, Upendrakishore Ray, the new convert. Since the Brahmo Samaj approved of young people arranging their own marriages and had nothing against suitable inter-caste unions, the non-brahmin Ray married Miss Ganguli in 1885.

Subsequently, he invested his income from the *zamindari* in Masooa, acquiring a Calcutta house in which his three talented sons and three talented daughters lived in the shadow of the experimental printing press he founded. U. Ray, as he became known, devoted himself to working out new processes and topped his efforts by introducing half-tone printing in India.

The children, among whom Satyajit Ray's father, Sukumar, was the eldest son, grew up in an atmosphere of music and painting. Upendrakishore was a sensitive artist, particularly in landscape painting, and an excellent violinist. He even wrote tracts on Western music. Possessed of great imagination, he founded a children's magazine, as later his son, Sukumar, also founded one - *Sandesh* - which Satyajit

Ray has revived.

Two of Upendrakishore's younger brothers were also writers, and one became the translator into Bengali of the science-fiction novels of Jules Verne and the spate of Sherlock Holmes books as well as Conan Doyle's *Lost World*. Then there was elder brother, Saradaranjan Ray, Sanskrit scholar and mathematician, who looked the double of, and dressed like W.G. Grace, and whose crusade for the spread of the most English of games earned him the designation "Father of Bengali Cricket."

"My father and grandfather were idealists," says Satyajit Ray, "They wanted to change so many things."

His father, Sukumar, born in 1887, was singularly gay of spirit and became most noted for his nonsense rhymes and highly individual illustrations for *Sandesh*. He could act, write plays, paint and was—as his only son was to become—an exceptional designer. In 1911, Upendrakishore bundled him off to the College of Technology in Manchester. When he returned in 1913, Sukumar, like his father, married for love, the girl being Suprabha Das, with the musical talent so marked in her family for three generations.

### A Visionary

Suprabha was the grand-daughter of Kalinarayan Gupta, one of the most visionary converts to Brahmoism. He had joined the movement in 1969 in Dacca, where he, also an adopted heir, had inherited a moderate-sized *zamindari*. Thirtynine years old at the time of his conversion, Gupta and his wife, Ananda, both had marvellous singing voices and composed devotional songs. A line in one of Babu Kalinarayan's hymns declares: "When the fire of love glows, the moon then appears even on a moonless night."

With the death of Upendrakishore Ray in 1915, not long after his son's marriage to



Kalinarayan's grand-daughter, the ever-gay and courageous Sukumar Ray, imaginative illustrator and creator of children's stories, inherited the printing press, U. Ray and Sons. He still drew some income from the Masooa estate in East Bengal. But the *zamindari* income was dwindling and printers trained by Upendrakishore were setting up their own presses in competition. Things were not as easy as in Upendrakishore's pioneering days.

### Near Death

It was eight years before Sukumar and his wife had a child Satyajit, born on May 2, 1921. The child was hardly born than it was discovered that Sukumar, who had visited the Mymensingh estate to try to collect rents, had contracted black-water fever, for which at that time there was no cure. Before he knew this, he wrote a curious letter—as if he had inherited the powers of prediction seemingly possessed by Loknath Ray, his great-grandfather. Sukumar wrote that he felt a change coming and the change was towards death. "Death" was written in English and underlined.

As Satyajit, his son, began to toddle,

everyone knew that his talented father, with his creative work only half fulfilled, was a doomed man. As the illness attacked him even more deeply, one of the most distressed was Rabindranath Tagore, who used to come and visit the Rays. To celebrate one of Sukumar's last birthdays - perhaps his 35th—he and his wife and Satyajit, journeyed to Santiniketan, where Rabindranath would later insist on taking Satyajit to be a student. It is said that Rabindranath reprimanded his young friend for coming unannounced, for it gave the poet no time to compose a special birthday song for Sukumar, whom many people felt had the greatest creative potential of any of the younger writers and painters of the 1920s.

When Sukumar died at the age of 35 in 1923, Rabindranath wrote that he had learned from a young friend that a man could meet death as an adventure. Almost at the very moment of the extinction of Sukumar's gay spirit, he dictated one of his nonsense rhymes, with the deepest double meaning.

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*We all must strive for excellence, for excellence is attainable, gratifying and healthy.*